

As Mitt Romney looks at where his presidential bid stands, he must get an uncomfortable feeling of “déjà vu all over again,” as Yogi Berra would say.

But so far, Romney’s backers on Capitol Hill are remaining publicly unruffled, insisting that the differences between then and now are more important than the parallels.

**“He is both a much better campaigner and running a much better campaign than was the case four years ago,” Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.) told The Hill.**

**Campbell**, who endorsed Romney in 2008 and has done so again this cycle, added: “Four years ago, he was tentative. This time he is much more confident, much more comfortable.”

But Romney’s improvement as a candidate does not necessarily neutralize the uncomfortable similarities to 2008.

Then, as now, he was anointed as a front-runner by the media.

Then as now, he was the best-financed candidate in the race, and the one with the strongest appeal to what remains of the GOP establishment.

Yet then, as now, despite these considerable advantages, he failed to close the deal with the Republican electorate, in large part because of a visceral distrust of him among many of the party’s grassroots supporters.

Four years ago this month, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee surged in the GOP polls, setting the stage for his January 2008 victory in Iowa. Romney had spent \$10 million in the Hawkeye State, but his campaign never regained its equilibrium.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) defeated Romney in next-to-vote New Hampshire, South Carolina and Florida. That, for all intents and purposes, was that.

This time, it seems former Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) poses the gravest threat.

But Gingrich, with his three marriages and taste for Tiffany jewelry, seems a less powerful magnet for the votes of social conservatives than was Huckabee, who spent 12 years as a Baptist pastor.

Couple that with the absence of a rival who could make a very strong case for national electability — the role filled by McCain last time around — and it becomes clearer why Romney supporters on Capitol Hill show little public sign of nerves.

“As your options whittle down, you get more practical about what you’re doing,” Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Ala.), who endorsed Romney both in 2008 and now, told The Hill. “People will gravitate toward the people who can beat Obama, and that is what they really care about. Romney may not be anybody’s perfect candidate, but he is pretty clearly the best general election candidate.”

Even Rep. Jack Kingston (R-Ga.), who endorsed Romney in 2008 but is backing Gingrich this time around, argued that Romney’s tepid poll numbers need not be viewed as such a grave vulnerability. Rather, he said, they are an almost inevitable consequence of being one choice in a multicandidate field.

“People look at the debates and think Newt makes the most sense,” he said.

“Herman Cain is a very charismatic guy. Santorum has his 4 [percent] to 7 percent that doesn’t go away. Ron Paul has his people, and you can’t blow those people away.

“Those people who put their stake in the ground like that make it difficult for Romney to gain numbers.”

(Kingston is not so magnanimous toward every contender. He said Texas Gov. Rick Perry “has a remarkable record but, as a candidate, he could not have been worse.”)

The volatility that has seen Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.), Perry, Cain and now Gingrich rise in the polls might just as easily be seen as reflecting an amorphous but persistent anti-Romney vote that no one (until, perhaps, Gingrich) has successfully retained.

“Many Republicans look at Romney as essentially a Trojan horse,” said Kyle Kondik of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. “There is a real hunger for somebody else because, for a number of reasons, conservatives don’t think he is one of them.”

Rep. Judy Biggert (R-Ill.), another Romney supporter, insisted that “the media pick a candidate of the week or the month.”

“That’s why I like that Mitt Romney has stayed on a path, one that has not been disturbed,” she said.

There might be some signs of this imperturbability weakening, however, with Romney’s contentious interview with Fox News anchor Bret Baier last week, and a more general sense that his team is still pondering how to deal with the Gingrich threat.

In any event, if Romney is to be stopped, it seems as if Iowa would have to be his Waterloo.

Winning there and in New Hampshire, which adjoins Massachusetts and where he owns a home, would make his nomination seem almost inevitable.

But Iowa, a state where the Republican electorate tends to have a considerably more socially conservative bent, seems to give even confirmed Romney backers some queasiness.

“I have never been a big fan of the Iowa caucuses,” Rogers said. “I was frankly hopeful that Gov. Romney would not spend a lot of time there, because I think those caucuses are a bit weird.”

Other supporters argued that one of the lessons Team Romney has learned since last time out is to manage expectations more carefully.

That way, they suggest, even a defeat in Iowa would not be such a fatal torpedo as it was in 2008.

**“If you lower expectations, it’s different,” Campbell said. “I don’t think Iowa is any easier for him than it was four years ago. But they are being more realistic this time, and not talking about making a sweep everywhere. Last time, they felt like they could win everywhere.”**

To his backers, Romney has benefited from identifying his weaknesses — like the management consultant he once was — and diligently trying to neutralize them.

But as the clock ticks down to another showdown in Iowa, they could be forgiven for entertaining private doubts as to whether that will be enough to win.